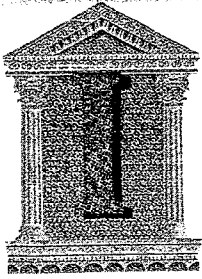


# The Heritage of Greece and Rome 17



**I**t is almost impossible to overestimate the influence the civilizations of Greece and Rome have had on American civilization. If you visit our nation's capital, you will see that the great majority of our important national buildings and monuments are based on Greek and Roman architecture.

The Lincoln Memorial was inspired by the Parthenon, and the White House, the Jefferson Memorial, the Supreme Court, and the Capitol are all based on Greek and Roman designs. In fact, it is rare to find a statehouse anywhere in the country that is not based, at least partly, on classical architecture. Many older banks and churches also show traces of the classical style.

But these buildings are only the tip of the iceberg. Our political institutions have also been profoundly influenced by these ancient cultures. The leaders of the American Revolution and the framers of the United States Constitution paid close attention to the political history of Greece and Rome. They didn't want the American states to be as disunified as the ancient Greek city-states, but they didn't want the national government to be as strong and centralized as it was under the Roman Empire either. In laying out the Constitution, they tried to create a mixed government, in which different offices served as "checks and balances" against one other, and they paid particularly close attention to the Roman Republic.

As a result, we have a government that borrows heavily from the Romans. We pledge allegiance to a republic inspired by the Roman Republic, and we elect senators to a Senate modeled partly on the Roman Senate. But we have borrowed from the Greeks as well: from them we have taken the idea of democracy, the principle of majority rule, and the concept of a jury. Even our major political parties—Democratic and Republican—can trace their names back to ancient Greece and Rome.

The cultural influence of ancient Greece and Rome is with us not only on election day but every day of the year. Although most people don't realize it, our calendar is basically a Roman calendar, designed by Julius Caesar. Several of our months are named for Roman gods, and two summer months are named for Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar.

The way we divide our day into A.M. and P.M. also comes from the Romans. The Romans divided the day into two parts: the time before the sun reaches its meridian, or middle point, and the time after the sun passes the meridian. In Latin (the language of ancient Rome), these periods are referred to as *ante meridiem*, or A.M., and *post meridiem*, or P.M.

Nor are these the only abbreviations that come from the Latin language. Do you know anyone who has a B.A. degree? Or maybe an M.A., M.D., J.D., or Ph.D.? All of these abbreviations come from Latin. And so do some others you might see in books. The abbreviation e.g. (*exempli gratia*) means "for example"; i.e. (*id est*) means "that is"; and n.b. (*nota bene*) means "note well."

## Greek and Latin Words

Thousands of English words are derived from Latin words. Examples include senate, justice, jurisprudence, cereal, salary, street, port, prejudice, property, candle, and hospital. English also includes many Greek words. You have already encountered a number of these in this unit, including politics, policeman, metropolis, democracy, aristocracy, spartan, laconic, olympics, marathon, epic, philosophy, comedy, tragedy, and rhetoric. To this list could be added many more, including

astronomy, economics, mathematics, geometry, physics, rhythm, music, poetry, athlete, stadium, hero, harmony, melody, and metaphor. You probably speak several Latin and Greek words every day without even realizing it.

Of course, all of this might have turned out differently. If the Athenians and Spartans had not combined to force the Persians out of Greece during the Persian Wars, the Persians might have conquered much of Europe and our language might be full of Persian words. We might not think about politics, drama, or architecture in the same way that we do today. Likewise, if Carthage had burned Rome to the ground and plowed the Italian fields with salt, both our language and our culture would certainly be different. But those things never happened. Instead, it was the civilizations of Greece and Rome that prevailed and prospered. These two civilizations had a great influence on the European cultures that came after them, and European immigrants eventually brought much of their culture to America.

The knowledge and accomplishments of the ancient Greeks and Romans laid the groundwork

for many of the achievements of later centuries. Engineering achievements, such as the column and the arch, made it possible to build cathedrals, palaces, law courts, and government buildings as well as bridges and towers. History made it possible to understand and learn from the past, while philosophy and religion made it easier to understand the universe. Drama and art made life more enjoyable; government made it more orderly; medicine and science helped extend it.

All these things, taken together, make up the cultural **heritage** of ancient Greece and Rome. They represent a tradition, or a collection of ideas and concepts that we have inherited from these earlier cultures. The Greco-Roman heritage is so rich, and so important, that it is impossible to fully understand modern America without knowing a little about ancient Greece and Rome. That is why these ancient civilizations are still important in our modern world.

### **vocabulary**

**heritage** customs and beliefs that people inherit from an earlier time, people, or culture

*Many of our ideas of government can be traced to ancient Greece. The democratic principle of people choosing their own leaders is demonstrated at political conventions like this one, where presidential candidates are chosen.*

